

Ezekiel's Responsibility

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 17:5–10
Background Scripture: Ezekiel 18:1–32; 33:1–20

Ezekiel 33:7–16a

⁷ “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ⁸ When I say to the wicked, ‘You wicked person, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. ⁹ But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

¹⁰ “Son of man, say to the Israelites, ‘This is what you are saying: “Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?”’ ¹¹ Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?’

¹² “Therefore, son of man, say to your people, ‘If someone who is righteous disobeys, that person’s former righteousness will count for nothing. And if someone who is wicked repents, that person’s former wickedness will not bring condemnation. The righteous person who sins will not be allowed to live even though they were formerly righteous.’ ¹³ If I tell a righteous person that they will surely live, but then they trust in their righteousness and do evil, none of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered; they will die for the evil they have done. ¹⁴ And if I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ but they then turn away from their sin and do what is just and right—¹⁵ if they give back what they took in pledge for a loan, return what they have stolen, follow the decrees that give life, and do no evil—that person will surely live; they will not die. ¹⁶ None of the sins that person has committed will be remembered against them.”

Key Text

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.” —Ezekiel 33:7

Judah, from Isaiah to the Exile

Unit 3: Ezekiel and the Exile of Judah

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify righteous and unrighteous behavior.
2. Compare and contrast Ezekiel's role as a watchman with the New Testament's imperatives in that regard.
3. Make a plan to speak the truth in love and warn others of danger, even when the news is unwelcome.

Lesson Outline

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Introduction

A. Learning about Hot Stoves

Philosophies regarding learning styles go in and out of fashion. Categorizing people as visual learners, auditory learners, or kinesthetic (physical activity) learners has its adherents. Categorizing learning theories as cognitive, behaviorist, constructivist, humanist, and connective holds sway in some quarters. The list goes on and on.

Let's try a simpler approach by proposing that there are two general ways to learn things: by *wisdom* and by *experience*. Wisdom is when you learn from the mistakes of others; experience is when you learn from your own mistakes. Parents readily see these two learning styles in their children. The mother warns that the stove is hot. One child heeds the warning and doesn't touch it (wisdom); the other child puts his hand on the stove anyway, only to withdraw it quickly in pain (experience).

We've all heard the old saying, "Experience is the best teacher." But we easily see the fallacy of this axiom when the alternative is to be taught by wisdom. In today's lesson, the residents of Judah now in Babylonian exile continue to learn the hard way (by experience) the consequences of disobeying God; they are also reminded of the alternative.

B. Lesson Context

References to "the twelfth year" of the Babylonian exile bracket today's lesson text of Ezekiel 33:7–16a (see Ezekiel 32:1, 17; 33:21). That exile happened in three stages, with deportations taking place in the years 605, 597, and 586 BC (2 Kings 24:1–25:21). "The twelfth year" dates from 597 BC (Ezekiel 1:2). Thus our lesson today takes us into the year of the fall of Jerusalem, in 586 BC. The residents of Judah who had been in exile already for 12 years and longer were about to experience another wave of their countrymen joining them in captivity.

Regarding literary context, the text for today's lesson is part of the larger unit of Ezekiel 33:1–20. This unit examines and illustrates Ezekiel's role as a prophet, the messages he is to convey, what mindset to expect from his audience, and how to respond to wrong thinking. Ezekiel 33:1–

20 is something of a condensed version of Ezekiel 18, in which the prophet corrects an exaggerated view of group responsibility that sees its members as children suffering for the sins of their parents.

I. Watchman to the Exiles

(Ezekiel 33:7)

A. Commissioned (v. 7a)

7a. “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel;

This half-verse offers three phrases that are familiar by this point in the book of Ezekiel. Regarding the 93 uses of the phrase *Son of man* to designate Ezekiel, see commentary on Ezekiel 3:10 in last week’s lesson. Regarding the initial designation of the prophet as *a watchman*, see Ezekiel 3:17. Regarding the use of the phrase *the people of Israel*, see commentary on Ezekiel 24:21 in last week’s lesson (compare Jeremiah 36:2).

The word *watchman* appears in the *New International Version* 15 times plus 4 instances where the translation is “lookout,” a total of 19; 5 of those 19 are in the book of Ezekiel. In a physical sense, a watchman is a sentinel whose observation post is at the top of an elevated tower. From there he can relay information regarding the approach of enemy forces (2 Kings 9:17, etc.). He is the ancient version of an electronic early warning system. God calls Ezekiel to be a spiritual watchman over his people.

B. Commanded (v. 7b)

7b. “so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.

The second half of the verse leaves no doubt regarding Ezekiel’s role as watchman: he is to warn the people of approaching consequences for sinful behavior. Again, this is nothing new to Ezekiel; the command seen here reinforces the one already given in Ezekiel 3:17.

What to Watch First

A friend’s young daughter overheard her father telling the neighbor something that wasn’t 100 percent accurate. And with all the boldness of a 6-year-old, she confronted her father about his lie.

She reminded him of his own words to her about lying and why it was wrong.

Adults seem to become less bold in that regard as the years pass. When witnessing sin, it’s often easier just to remain silent. We don’t want to “make waves.” We justify our silence by misinterpreting the “do not judge” of Matthew 7:1. We fear the various repercussions that can ensue (compare John 7:13; 9:22; 12:42; 19:38; etc.). One repercussion for Ezekiel was to be treated dismissively (Ezekiel 20:49).

We move toward a godly solution by pausing to realize what we should watch first and foremost: ourselves (Luke 17:1–2; Galatians 6:1; 1 Timothy 4:16). Failure to do so results in hypocrisy. And in our continuous self-watch, we make certain we are using God’s Word as the standard for the evaluation (2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:12; contrast 2 Corinthians 10:12). What steps can you take today to watch yourself more faithfully? —S. S.

II. Warning the Unrighteous

(Ezekiel 33:8–9)

A. Guilt and Accountability (v. 8)

8. “When I say to the wicked, ‘You wicked person, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood.

A repeated theme in this book is that of personal responsibility for sin (compare Ezekiel 33:14, 20; 18:4). And for the prophet Ezekiel to turn a blind eye toward such sin will result in his bearing some level of responsibility for the resulting deaths (*I will hold you accountable for their blood*). In a spiritual sense, we would place such intentional blindness in the category of a “sin of omission”—failing to do something required by God (Numbers 9:13, etc.). In an earthly sense, this might be similar to “negligent homicide,” where a person’s conduct disregards the life and safety of others (compare 35:22–23). The attitude of the runaway prophet Jonah is informative here.

The Hebrew verb translated *dissuade* here occurs frequently in the book of Ezekiel compared with the rest of the Old Testament. What may be

implied regarding the responsibility of other biblical prophets is stated to Ezekiel clearly and often.

interpret actions and attitudes in sinful ways (Isaiah 5:20, etc.).

What Do You Think?

Do you think it is fair that Ezekiel will be responsible for the blood of those he does not warn? Why or why not?

Digging Deeper

What are ways we might be called to warn those around us?

None of Your Business?

Imagine this situation: you are standing on the platform of a commuter train station. You look up and see someone standing on the railroad tracks, blissfully unaware that a train is approaching. Would you not instinctively yell at your loudest to warn that person to get off the tracks?

Now change that scene to be spiritual in nature as you imagine that the train is God’s wrath as it approaches an unrepentant sinner who isn’t aware of the danger. Shouldn’t you likewise shout a warning, or would you merely think, *How sad, but that’s none of my business?*

Let’s push this further. If in either situation you shout the warning, but the endangered person shouts in reply, “Where I’m standing and what I’m doing is none of your business!” What would you do next? —R. L. N.

B. Guilt and Immunity (v. 9)

9. “But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

This verse repeats Ezekiel 3:19. The prophet will not bear any responsibility for the death of the unrepentant if Ezekiel has done his job of communicating the divine will. We may wonder why such a prophetic warning is even necessary! Have the covenant people not had the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses for centuries at this point? Indeed, they have. But things can get “lost in the shuffle” in various ways (2 Kings 22:8–13, etc.). And we humans seem to have a desire to

III. Warning the Israelites
(Ezekiel 33:10–16a)

A. Irrelevant Past (vv. 10–12)

10a. “Son of man, say to the Israelites, See commentary on Ezekiel 33:7a, above, regarding these two phrases.

10b. “ ‘This is what you are saying: “Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?” ’

God anticipates an if-then response from the people, and he begins to prepare his prophet to answer it. The *if* part indicates that the truth of the people’s personal responsibility for their *transgressions* and *sins* is beginning to sink in.

When a person is in a very negative situation, there’s typically an attempt to discover why. Often this involves “playing the blame game,” as others are seen to be responsible. But, as Ezekiel 18 also tells us, God will have none of this! As the people begin to “get it” in this regard, they will wonder what they can do to reverse the situation. Change will seem hopeless given the fact that they now are low on strength (*wasting away*) to change things as they languish in exile. Their experience of wasting away was itself part of the covenantal curses (Leviticus 26:39; compare Ezekiel 4:17; 24:23.)

How Ezekiel is to respond to the if-then question is established in the next verse.

What Do You Think?

Why do you think it was hard for the Israelites to turn away from their sins, even when they knew that their sins were killing them?

Digging Deeper

What sins do we find especially hard to turn from as individuals? As a community?

11. “Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn

from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?’

The oath-phrase *as surely as I live* occurs 16 times in Ezekiel—far more than in any other book of the Bible. With its use, God takes an oath in the only worthy name: his own. Since people swear oaths by something higher than themselves and nothing is higher than God, God swears an oath in his own name (Hebrews 6:13; compare Matthew 5:33–37; 23:16–22). This solemn oath is God’s assurance that he is willing and able to reclaim the repentant person’s life. But there must be a permanent turning from sin.

The one who created us takes no delight in our suffering, even when it is deserved. As 2 Peter 3:9 puts it, God is “patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (compare Ezekiel 18:23, 32). Unlike Jonah, who wanted sinners destroyed, Ezekiel agrees with God. The prophet’s words aim to help the people change, not merely to condemn. He holds out hope that God’s words can again be honored.

This hope extends not just to individuals, but to the people as a whole. The rhetorical question *why will you die* becomes both an invitation to live and a recognition that change is possible.

12a. “Therefore, son of man, say to your people,

On the designation *son of man*, see the discussion above and of last week. The phrase *your people* would more literally be translated “sons of your people.” The phrase is interesting because of its rarity. The exact Hebrew lettering occurs only eight times in the Old Testament, and six of those eight are in Ezekiel—and four of those six are here in chapter 33. (For all eight, see Leviticus 19:18; Ezekiel 3:11; 33:2, 12, 17, 30; 37:18; Daniel 12:1.) The idea seems one of all-inclusiveness; the word of God applies to multiple generations.

How to Say It

Deuteronomy	Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.
Ezekiel	Ee-zeek-ee-ul or Ee-zeek-yul.
Leviticus	Leh-vit-ih-kus.
Zacchaeus	Zack-key-us.



Visual for Lesson 12. Display this visual as you discuss the commentary associated with Ezekiel 33:13–16a.

12b. “ ‘If someone who is righteous disobeys, that person’s former righteousness will count for nothing. And if someone who is wicked repents, that person’s former wickedness will not bring condemnation.

This verse can be summed up this way: whichever way you turn, the past doesn’t count. If a *righteous* person rebels, his past life of *righteousness* won’t count. If a *wicked* person *repents*, her past life of wickedness won’t count.

For its part, the Hebrew word translated *righteous* is rendered differently in other passages, depending on context. In Ezekiel 45:10, it is translated three times as “accurate” (as in “fair”). In Proverbs 8:15, it is translated “just” as in “justly.” In all instances, the reference is to something positive.

12c. “ ‘The righteous person who sins will not be allowed to live even though they were formerly righteous.’

The prophet’s earlier use of this vocabulary in the lengthy chapter of Ezekiel 18 adds a nuanced, realistic view of human affairs. Proper treatment of others and devotion to God can break cycles of injustice and impiety. Those cycles do exist and have real power unless vigorously identified and resisted.

B. Reversible Present (vv. 13–16a)

13. “If I tell a righteous person that they will surely live, but then they trust in their

righteousness and do evil, none of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered; they will die for the evil they have done.

This verse stresses a contrast that has been previously sketched (Ezekiel 18:24; etc.). It will be stressed again centuries later in the era of the new covenant (Hebrews 10:38; 2 Peter 2:20–21). As we see God promising life to the *righteous person*, we hasten to stress that the phrases *will surely live* and *will die for the evil they have done* refer primarily to eternal life and eternal condemnation, respectively. The pages of the Bible bear witness to many instances of godly, righteous people who were persecuted to the point of losing their earthly lives as they lived out Matthew 10:28.

Digging deeper into the intent of this verse, we may wonder what kind of sin the phrase *do evil* refers to, and it's easy to draw the wrong conclusions. A righteous person will still sin, but less and less so as spiritual maturity progresses. But people don't actually *become* righteous under either the old or new covenant; the reality of sin prevents that. Rather, God has a plan that allows us to be *counted as if* we were righteous. Romans 4, quoting Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1–2, explains this. For those in Christ, the debt for all our sins—past, present, and future—has been paid by the blood of Christ (Romans 3:21–26; 1 John 1:9). What God speaks through Ezekiel, rather, seems to deal with a decisive change in allegiance by a person, the new allegiance being to wickedness and iniquity (1 John 2:15–17).

What Do You Think?

What do you think it means that righteous people can “trust” in their righteousness and still “do evil”?

Digging Deeper

How can we guard against acting as though they were above the law?

14. “And if I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ but they then turn away from their sin and do what is just and right—

These two verses revisit a topic already discussed; in this case the reference is to Ezekiel

18:27; 33:8, above. A choice of taking the path of the *wicked person* is not an irreversible one. For the wicked to switch to the path of the righteous is possible, as it involves both attitude and action. The attitude is to *turn away from their sin* as the person renounces that path. The action embraces positive behaviors that are consistent with those of a righteous person according to God’s expectations.

The words *just* and *right* are translations of two common Hebrew words that appear together about 100 times in the Old Testament. Together in the phrase *that which is just and right*, they occur only 12 times, 8 of which are in this book (Ezekiel 18:5, 19, 21, 27; 33:14, 16, 19; 45:9). In this regard, the two words seem to be used as synonyms or near-synonyms, such as they are used together in poetic passages (Psalms 36:6; 72:1; etc.). The word translated *just* is also translated “laws” in Ezekiel 20:11; there it is teamed up with the word *decrees* to identify the path of life.

What Do You Think?

If a person may repent and receive mercy, what does this tell us about how God feels about people who do evil things?

Digging Deeper

How should this change how we feel about or treat such people?

15. “if they give back what they took in pledge for a loan, return what they have stolen, follow the decrees that give life, and do no evil—that person will surely live; they will not die.

We can’t miss the mirror image of Ezekiel 33:14–15 as these two verses reflect 33:13. This verse deals with some wrongs to be made right as the formerly wicked person walks the new path. *The pledge* refers to collateral or security taken for something that is on *loan* to someone else.

This issue is addressed in at least a dozen Old Testament passages. Regarding the nature of the collateral, six passages speak of an article of clothing (Exodus 22:26; Deuteronomy 24:17; Job 22:6; Proverbs 20:16; 27:13; Amos 2:8). Three passages

identify the collateral or security deposit in terms of a millstone (Deuteronomy 24:6), an ox (Job 24:3), and a child (Job 24:9). Those in Ezekiel 33:15; 18:12, 16 have an uncertain reference.

The observation “the borrower is slave to the lender” (Proverbs 22:7) reflects the fact that the lender has a lot of power over the borrower. This power is subject to abuse (compare 6:1–5; 11:15; 17:18). In an era without banks or other lending institutions, loans were person to person for purposes of survival, not for raising capital to start businesses. This tempted lenders to use failure to repay as an excuse for oppression.

The wicked pay no attention to restrictions in the Law of Moses either as they relate to retaining a pledge or to requirements for restitution (Exodus 22:1–4; Leviticus 6:2–5; Numbers 5:5–8). The phrase *return what they have stolen* is another indicator of the right behavior of one who changes from the path of death to the path of life. This reminds us of the repentant attitude and promised action of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8).

What Do You Think?

Repentance in this passage involves giving back what was taken. What might a person do when this is not possible?

Digging Deeper

What is an example of amends you have made when repenting of past sin?

16a. “None of the sins that person has committed will be remembered against them.”

God’s wrath awaits the unrepentant. But once repentance comes, God holds no grudges (Isaiah 43:25; Ezekiel 18:22), unlike people (compare Leviticus 19:18). Divine forgiveness is not a “one and done” feature of God’s love. It is ongoing, and its “talk” must be accompanied by its “walk” for a God-honoring outcome.

Conclusion

A. Living as a Watchman

As members of the new covenant, today we continue to ponder the connection between sin and suffering for those living under the old cov-

enant (compare Job 21:19; Luke 13:1–5; John 9:2). Righteous people do indeed suffer because of realities beyond their control. But today’s lesson says that the path of the righteous is the one to travel nonetheless. Walking the path of the wicked results in destruction. Considering God’s charge to Ezekiel to be a watchman, how might we live out a watchman role?

At the outset, it is important to understand that Ezekiel received his call to serve as a prophetic watchman by direct revelation from God. Ezekiel filled this role at a particular time in history, to a particular group of people, in ways that were relevant to his time, place, and audience. We are not prophets in the same sense that Ezekiel was. Those who claim today to be commissioned by God to be prophets in the sense of being able to foretell the future may well be proven wrong (Deuteronomy 18:22; Hebrews 1:1–2).

Even so, there are opportunities for us to speak a watchman’s words of warning and wisdom to those around us. God doesn’t desire that anyone should perish (2 Peter 3:9). He punishes disobedience justly, but he is also gracious, merciful, and patient. He invites sinners to repent and turn from their wicked ways to find life in his Son. We have this good news to proclaim!

Moreover, it is not up to us whether people heed our words. Like Ezekiel, our responsibility is to tell the story of the good news of the gospel (Matthew 28:19–20). Whether that good news is accepted or rejected is not within our control. However, our own faithfulness in proclaiming it is.

B. Prayer

O God our Father, who does not desire anyone to be lost in sin or crushed by despair, speak good news into our broken world so that we may make wrongs right and restore relationships to a state of health. Keep us from the path of eternal death. Grant us strength as we continue on the way of the One who is “the way, the truth, and the life,” your Son, Jesus. It is in his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Speak and act as a watchman!